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PRESS BRIEFING
BY PRINCIPAL DEPUTY PRESS SECRETARY SARAH SANDERS

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

1:49 P.M. EDT

MS. SANDERS: Light crowd.

Q Slow news day.

MS. SANDERS: So I've heard.

Good afternoon, everybody. As most of you, I think, know, Sean is on reserve duty for the rest of this week, so I will be briefing you today and in the following days. I've got a few announcements here at the top before I take your questions.

I've an update on the tunnel collapse at the Hanford nuclear waste site in Washington State. The incident is moving from the emergency phase toward the recovery phase. After extensive testing, we remain confident at this point that there has been no indication of worker exposure or an airborne radiological release.

Personnel began taking steps to stabilize and fill the hole over the partially collapsed tunnel last night, and we expect those efforts to be completed today. The site remains closed to nonessential personnel. Dedicated experts on the ground are looking closely at what next steps should be taken with respect to mitigating future tunnel breaches.

In Washington, D.C. today, as Sean mentioned yesterday, the President is focused on preparations for his upcoming foreign trip. He met this morning with the Russian Foreign Minister, following on the visit of Secretary of State Tillerson to Moscow last month. A readout of that meeting went out about an hour ago, and I'd refer you to that for further questions on the meeting.

Outside of D.C., as part of the administration's ongoing effort to address the opioid crisis in America, Secretary Price continues his listening tour, learning from those on the frontlines battling the epidemic. Today he will meet with officials in Maine and New Hampshire to discuss how the administration can best support the local initiatives to combat this tragedy.

Secretary Zinke is in Utah today, visiting national monument sites and meeting with local officials to comply with the President's executive order that ordered a review of national monument designations. The Secretary also took another step to advance the President's America First offshore energy strategy by reversing an Obama administration action to halt scientific research in the Outer Continental Shelf.

And Secretary DeVos is in Daytona Beach, Florida to deliver the commencement address at Bethune Cookman University. The university is a great example of a topnotch education HBCUs have historically provided and continue to provide to their students. And I know the Secretary is honored to be there today.

There's also another nugget of big news, as you guys may have been paying attention, in regard to the termination of the former FBI Director Comey. The President, over the last several months, lost confidence in Director Comey. The DOJ lost confidence in Director Comey. Bipartisan members of Congress made it clear that they had lost confidence in Director Comey. And most importantly, the rank and file of the FBI had lost confidence in their director.

Accordingly, the President accepted the recommendation of his Deputy Attorney General to remove James Comey from his position. Before the news broke, the President spoke to several members of Congress to inform them of his decision. Those members are Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, Speaker of the House Paul Ryan, Senator Chuck Grassley, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, Senator Feinstein, Senator Lindsey Graham, House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, and Congressman Bob Goodlatte. Later in the evening, he also spoke to Senator Bob Corker, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.

In addition to all of the big news happening at the White House today, it is also my daughter, Scarlet's fifth birthday. And since I'm here and you guys are, I get to wish Scarlet a happy birthday. And with that, I think her first birthday wish would probably be that you guys are incredibly nice. (Laughter.) And now I will take your questions.

Hallie.

Q Sarah, I think it would be helpful to establish some of the facts, I have a couple broader questions for you. So, number one, yes or no, did the President direct Rod Rosenstein to write this memo on James Comey?

MS. SANDERS: No, the President had lost -- again, like I said, he'd lost confidence in Director Comey, and, frankly, he'd been considering letting Director Comey go since the day he was elected. But he did have a conversation with the Deputy Attorney General on Monday, where they had come to him to express their concerns. The President asked they put those concerns and their recommendation in writing, which is the letter that you guys have received.

Q So it's the White House's assertion that Rod Rosenstein decided on his own, after being confirmed, to review Comey's performance?

MS. SANDERS: Absolutely. And I think most of America had decided on their own that Director Comey was not the person that should be leading the FBI, as evidenced by the numerous comments that we've seen from Democrat members in the House and Senate, Republican members, members of the FBI, and people across the board.

Q Since we're establishing the facts -- Senator Dianne Feinstein said she was told something different directly from the President. The President said he asked Rosenstein and Sessions to review this. Is she lying?

MS. SANDERS: He asked them for their recommendation, based on the conversation that they had on Monday. He asked them to put that recommendation in writing. But they came to him on his own. And again, the President had lost confidence in Comey from the day he was elected. He wasn't sure that he should be --

Q Then why did Sean say he did? On May 3rd, Sean came out and said that the President had full confidence in his FBI Director? Why did he say that?

MS. SANDERS: Look, I think -- again, he's questioned Director Comey's reason for needing to stay at the FBI. He had countless conversations with members from within the FBI. I think one of the big catalysts that we saw was, last week, on Wednesday, Director Comey made a pretty startling revelation that he had essentially taken a stick of dynamite and thrown it into the Department of Justice by going around the chain of command when he decided to take steps without talking to the Attorney General or the Deputy Attorney General when holding a press conference and telling them that he would not let them know what he was going to say --

Q Then why did the President --

MS. SANDERS: -- and that is simply not allowed.

And somebody like the Deputy Attorney General, Rod Rosenstein -- who everybody across the board has unequivocally said, this guy is a man of upstanding character and essentially the gold standard at the Department of Justice -- when you

take an action like that, when you go around the chain of command in the Department of Justice, then you have to make steps and take action to make a recommendation to the President. And that's what he did.

Q -- Republicans say that they --

Q -- Russian investigation, Sarah? Does it have to do with the investigation into Russia? How do you respond to those criticisms?

MS. SANDERS: John, go ahead. We'll come back to that, I'm sure.

Q Until you said from the podium just now that the President lost confidence in him over the last weeks and months, we had thought that this was all Rosenstein's doing. When was it that the President lost confidence in James Comey? What was the tipping point?

MS. SANDERS: I think it's been an erosion of confidence. I think that Director Comey has shown over the last several months and, frankly, the last year, a lot of missteps and mistakes. And certainly I think that, as you've seen from many of the comments from Democrat members, including Senator Schumer, they didn't think he should be there, they thought he should be gone. Frankly, I think it's startling that Democrats aren't celebrating this since they've been calling for it for so long.

John.

Q Well, hang on --

MS. SANDERS: Oh, a follow-up.

Q Don't forget, and I have another one I need to ask you, too.

MS. SANDERS: I think there's a two-question limit around here.

Q To follow on that, you said that he made a lot of missteps and mistakes. Back at the end of October, this President was applauding the FBI Director when he reopened the investigation into Hillary Clinton's emails. So he seemed quite happy with him at that point. What changed?

MS. SANDERS: Well, I think the President's position. One he was a candidate for President, not the President. Those are two very different things. Once you take over leading the Department of Justice that's very different than being a candidate in a campaign. As you guys all know, there's a very clear distinction between those two things.

I think also having a letter like the one that he received and having that conversation that outlined the basic just atrocities in circumventing the chain of command in the Department of Justice. Any person of legal mind in authority knows what a big deal that is, particularly in the Department of Justice, particularly for somebody like the Deputy Attorney General, who has been part of the Justice Department for 30 years and is such a respected person -- when he saw that, he had to speak up on that action, and I think that was the final catalyst.

Q And just a real quick question on the meetings this morning. The President is accused by Democrats of trying to circumvent the Russia investigation by firing Comey; he meets with the Russian Foreign Minister and the Russian Ambassador to the United States. He's accused of being Nixonian; he meets with Richard Nixon's Secretary of State. The timing of all of this, is it just ironic or is this the President poking a finger in his critic's eye?

MS. SANDERS: Look, these were meetings that have been on the books for a while. They didn't just happen this morning. There's not a strategy to go after the Democrats on this.

I think, frankly, the saddest thing is that the Democrats are trying to politicize and take away from something that the President should be doing. He should be meeting with the Foreign Minister. He should be meeting with people like Kissinger. And for them to try to attack him for doing his job, -- maybe they should spent a little more time doing their jobs, and we wouldn't have all the problems that we do.

Jonathan.

Q Sarah, isn't it true that the President had already decided to fire James Comey, and he asked the Justice Department to put together the rationale for that firing?

MS. SANDERS: No.

Q When did he make the decision?

MS. SANDERS: He made the decision for -- the final decision to move forward with it was yesterday. But I know that he's been contemplating it for a while.

Q But how do you explain what Dianne Feinstein says, that the President told her that he was concerned with the mess at the FBI and asked the Justice Department to look into it?

MS. SANDERS: I can't speak for Senator Feinstein, but I did speak directly to the President and heard directly from him that he, again, had been considering letting Director Comey go pretty much since the day he took office, but that there was no request by him to have a review at the Department of Justice.

Q But was the reason for the firing what was written by the Deputy Attorney General? Is that why he did it?

MS. SANDERS: That was, I think, the final piece that moved the President to make that quick and decisive action yesterday.

Q What did he mean in the letter that he wrote informing Comey that he was being fired -- he said, on three separate occasions Comey had told him that "I am not under investigation." What were those three occasions that the FBI Director told the President that he wasn't under investigation?

MS. SANDERS: I'm not going to get into the specifics of their conversations, but I can tell you that Director Comey relayed that information to the President.

Jeff.

Q Following up on that, Sarah, did the President ask Direct Comey whether he was under investigation when they were -- when they had these meetings?

MS. SANDERS: Again, I'm not going to go into the specifics of their conversations.

Q Is the White House concerned that -- he obviously made a decision to stick that in the letter and to make that public. Are there any concerns that it was inappropriate that they had that type of a conversation?

MS. SANDERS: No.

Charlie.

Q How important was the FBI Director's failure to stop the leaks coming out of the FBI to the President? How important was that?

MS. SANDERS: I think that's probably one of the many factors. You can't deny somebody -- that that wasn't a problem. And so I think that was just another one of the many reasons that he no longer had the confidence of the President or the rest of the FBI.

Q Can we expect more firings from the Justice Department?

MS. SANDERS: Not that I'm aware of today. (Laughter.)

Q Going forward, does the President want the Department of Justice to shut down what he's called a "taxpayer-funded charade" investigation?

MS. SANDERS: He wants them to continue with whatever they see appropriate and sees fit, just the same as he's encouraged the House and Senate committees to continue any ongoing investigations.

Look, the bottom line is any investigation that was happening on Monday is still happening today. That hasn't changed. And, in fact, we encourage them to complete this investigation so we can put it behind us and we can continue to see exactly what we've been saying for nearly a year, there's no evidence of collusion between the Trump campaign and Russia. And we'd love for that to be completed so that we can all move on and focus on the things that, frankly, I think most of Americans are concerned with.

Q Even if they keep on wasting taxpayer money, he wants it to continue?

MS. SANDERS: Look, nobody wants to waste taxpayer money. I think the President has made a priority of this. That's another reason we'd love for it to come to completion. But at the same time, I know that you all will not let this go until it does. And so we'd love for that to be completed. Let's put it behind us. Let's move on, and let's focus on what we need to do to turn our country around.

Q Sarah, two questions. One, was the White House aware at the time of this decision and announcement that grand jury subpoenas in the case of Michael Flynn had just gone out?

MS. SANDERS: No, nor would we -- should we have been.

Q Do you know anything about that process?

MS. SANDERS: No, I don't. I'd have to refer you to --

Q And does the White House believe that if these FBI investigations are going to proceed in these allegations of Russian interference, do you support continued funding, and support who to lead that investigation? Who is going to be running that right now? Are you confident that that could be McCabe, or does it have to be somebody else?

MS. SANDERS: Right now I believe that would fall to the Deputy Attorney General, Rod Rosenstein. And we are incredibly confident in his abilities, as I believe you can tell by the rest of the Senate, including many Democrats, are as well. Given the fact that he was confirmed 94 to 6 and had overwhelming praise from both sides of the aisle, I think there's complete confidence in him.

And another reason, frankly, for Director Comey to be out of the way so that they can have somebody leading this effort that everybody across the board has respect and confidence in. Nobody wants this to be finished and completed more than us so that we can focus on what we need to do here.

Q Sarah, the President said -- or excuse me -- Sean Spicer said just a week ago today the President has confidence in the Director. So, again, I'm sorry for not understanding this, but what has happened in the last seven days to shake the confidence? Was Sean lying at that point? Or did something happen in the last seven days?

MS. SANDERS: Of course, you'd love to add that in. But certainly not. Again, I think one of the big things that took place was the process in the hearing on Wednesday where, again -- not to sound like a broken record, but since you guys keep asking the same questions, I guess it's only fair that I keep giving the same answers -- but you have somebody, the Director of the FBI, who reports to the Deputy Attorney General, going around the chain of command. That's simply not okay. That's not something that is allowed in the justice system, nor should it be. That's a huge problem. That, along with the corrections that had to take place over the last, I believe, 48 hours, those are all big problems and another, I think, kind of final piece that pushed the President to make the decision that he did.

Q Does he regret not doing it earlier, like on January 20th or January 21st?

MS. SANDERS: No, I believe the President wanted to give Director Comey a chance, but he feels that he made the right decision, certainly.

Q Why did he do as he did it, if I could ask? Why did he have one of his long-time security advisors hand-deliver a letter to the FBI when the FBI Director was, in fact, in Los Angeles? Didn't he deserve a phone call or a face-to-face conversation? Why did he decide to do it like that?

MS. SANDERS: He followed the proper protocol in that process, which is a handwritten notification. And at the same time, no matter how you fire someone, it's never an easy process, and so he felt like following protocol was the best thing to do.

Q Does he plan to speak to him?

MS. SANDERS: I'm not aware of that conversation.

Q Was the President aware that James Comey asked for more resources in the Russia investigation? And did that factor into his decision to get rid of Mr. Comey, the Director?

MS. SANDERS: Not that I'm aware of, and I think that would be a better question for the Department of Justice.

Q Can I ask a follow-up? On the campaign trail, President Trump frequently said "lock her up," and he criticized the Department of Justice for not being harsh enough on Hillary Clinton. He actually praised Director Comey in October for having the guts to reopen the investigation. Why was he moved by a letter that said that Director Comey was, if anything, too harsh on Hillary Clinton? Why does that move the President to fire him?

MS. SANDERS: Again, I think you're looking at two very different positions. The President was wearing a different hat at that time. He was a candidate -- not the President. Those circumstances certainly change when you become the President. And again, when you go around the chain of command in the Department of Justice, when you, like I said before, throw a stick of dynamite into the Department of Justice, that's a big problem and it's one that cannot be ignored.

Q But he already knew that, didn't he, Sarah? He already knew what Mr. Comey had done.

MS. SANDERS: I think that this was -- my understanding is Wednesday was the first time the Director had openly and publicly made that statement and made that clear.

Q The statement today on the President's meeting with Foreign Minister Lavrov did not include anything on the reported incidents of violence in Chechnya against people in the LGBT community. Is the reason why that wasn't included in the readout is because the President is not informed on the issue?

MS. SANDERS: I'm sorry? Could you speak up a little bit?

Q Sure. Is the reason why that wasn't included in the readout is because the President isn't informed about the reports of anti-gay violence in Chechnya?

MS. SANDERS: Look, I mean a lot of times there are parts of the conversation that aren't specifically included in a readout. But I'm not aware -- I haven't had that conversation, so I don't know. I wasn't part of that meeting, so I can't speak to every detail. And I'd have to refer you to the readout on the specifics of what I know was discussed.

Q Has the President been briefed on this issue generally?

Q Was Syria --

Q Has the President been briefed on this issue generally?

MS. SANDERS: That's something I'll have to get back to you on. I'm not 100 percent sure.

Q You said you want the Russia investigation to continue at DOJ. Would the White House oppose the appointment of a special prosecutor to continue to look into -- to continue the investigation?

MS. SANDERS: We don't think it's necessary. You've got a House committee, a Senate committee, and the Department of Justice all working on this. I don't think that there's a necessary need at this point to add that. You've got the Deputy Attorney General, who I would say is about as independent as it comes due to the fact that he has such bipartisan support.

Q What gives you such confidence that the rank and file within the Bureau lost faith in the FBI Director? There's a special agent who is inside, who wrote us, who said: "The vast majority of the Bureau is in favor of Director Comey. This is a total shock. This is not supposed to happen. The real losers here are 20,000 front-line people in the organization because they lost the only guy working here in the past 15 years who actually cared about them."

So what's your response to these rank-and-file FBI agents who disagree with your contention that they lost faith in Director Comey?

MS. SANDERS: Look, we've heard from countless members of the FBI that say very different things. In fact, the President will be meeting with Acting Director McCabe later today to discuss that very thing -- the morale at the FBI -- as well as make an offer to go directly to the FBI if he feels that that's necessary and appropriate. And we'll certainly provide further information on that meeting for you guys.

Q The organization that represents FBI agents is asking for a voice in the selection process of Mr. Comey's successor. Is that something the President supports?

MS. SANDERS: I haven't had that conversation, but I know, at this point, it's being run through the Department of Justice. And so I would refer you to them on what that process looks like at this point in time.

Q Thanks, Sarah. Who did the President consult before making the final decision to fire James Comey?

MS. SANDERS: The President spoke with a number of individuals, but at the end of the day, it was the President's decision.

Q And in between Monday night and Tuesday, when he decided to fire the FBI Director, did he speak again with the Deputy Attorney General or the Attorney General?

MS. SANDERS: I know that they spoke on Monday, and I believe the next follow-up was actually in writing. They may have spoken, as well, but I'd have to double-check.

Q Just to be clear, so is it accurate to pull away from the information that we have that Monday night the President made the final call, said I want this in writing as a recommendation, and then took that recommendation as the evidence that he wanted to provide to fire James Comey?

MS. SANDERS: My understanding is the decision was actually made on Tuesday, but the first conversation that he had was on Monday, when there was an oral recommendation made, and the President requested that he see that in writing to review it further.

Blake.

Q Sarah, thank you. You say you want to move on and focus on the thing that Americans care about. So let me ask you about that. You're somewhat halfway home on healthcare. You still have tax reform to do, a spending bill, debt ceiling, and infrastructure. That's just a handful.

MS. SANDERS: Pretty big list.

Q Pretty big list, right? But what happened yesterday, you could argue, just widened the divide and made D.C. politics more toxic. So how do you go about accomplishing all of those things with, now, the heightened political environment that we're in?

MS. SANDERS: Frankly, I'm surprised that it did create a divide since you've had so many Republicans and Democrats repeatedly calling for Director Comey to be gone.

Frankly, I don't think it matters what this President says, you're going to have Democrats come out and fight him every single step of the way. I think that's one of the things that's wrong with Washington, and I think that's one of the reasons that we've got to get back to focusing on those issues and, frankly, draining the swamp a little bit further.

Q Was he surprised by the Democratic backlash? Did he anticipate it, considering some of the past statements?

MS. SANDERS: How could he have, considering the fact that most of the people that are declaring war today were the very ones that were begging for Director Comey to be fired? If Hillary Clinton had won the election -- which, thank God, she didn't -- but if she had, and she had been in the same position, she would have fired Comey immediately, and the very Democrats that are criticizing the President today would be dancing in the streets celebrating. So it's just the -- I think, the purest form of hypocrisy.

Jennifer.

Q Thanks, Sarah. Two questions. One, there's a report in Israel that indicates the President has made a decision not to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Can you confirm that? Has he made a decision on that?

MS. SANDERS: The President has not made a decision yet, and is still reviewing that.

Q Also, President Erdogan, in his speech, I think, this morning, warned the President against moving the embassy to Jerusalem. Does that warning and warning from other Arab leaders play into his decision as he's considering this move?

MS. SANDERS: I'm not going to get into the decision-making process here. All I can tell you is that he's still reviewing it, and as soon as we have a decision, I know we'll be happy to report back to you guys.

John.

Q Thank you, Sarah. Two questions, both related to the selection of a successor to Director Comey. When President Carter chose a FBI director, he had a blue ribbon panel advising him. Presidents Clinton and Obama interviewed several candidates. Is the President going to follow this pattern, or does he have some individual in mind at this point?

MS. SANDERS: Right now, I know that there are several individuals being considered, and the first step will be determining the acting -- or, excuse me, the interim director. And that is being handled through the Department of Justice, and I would refer you to them for right now.

Q And the other question I was going to ask was --

MS. SANDERS: Oh, yeah, I forgot you've got two.

Q I've got two. I'm pretty nice, Charlotte, aren't I?

Q Charlotte?

MS. SANDERS: Scarlet. But that's okay. (Laughter.)

Q He doesn't get a question anymore.

MS. SANDERS: It's a Southern baby.

Q Who's Charlotte?

Q Her daughter. Who's had a birthday.

MS. SANDERS: Just want to make sure we got that in again. Happy birthday, Scarlet.

Q Scarlet!

MS. SANDERS: "Gone with the Wind," come on, John.

Q I was going to say it is a fact that the Association of Former FBI Agents and Veterans of the Bureau generally prefer people who have been agents themselves or have a background in the FBI. Only two former agents have been director in the last four decades. Will the President consider current or former agents for the position?

MS. SANDERS: I would say that he's not ruling anything out at this point. But again, as of today, the Department of Justice is handling the first step in this process.

Q Should the Attorney General, who has recused himself from the Russia investigation, have any role in the selection of a successor? And given the fact that in his 100-day interviews, the President himself said he had confidence in Director Comey, at this podium the American people were told he had confidence in Director Comey, can people take at face value what the President says about personnel issues like this, or his views on things, if just two weeks later, he's out?

MS. SANDERS: Absolutely, you can take full confidence in the words of the President. In terms of whether or not Attorney General Sessions should have a role -- look, the FBI is doing a whole lot more than the Russia investigation. I know everybody in this room and probably most of the media around the world would like to think that's the FBI's sole responsibility, but that's probably one of the smallest things that they've got going on their plate, and the 20,000 employees that work there. And so he should absolutely have a role in seeing who runs that agency and that department.

Zeke.

Q Thanks, Sarah. Does the President have confidence in the Acting Director?

MS. SANDERS: Yes, he does.

Q Okay. And secondly, you mentioned earlier that you're encouraging the FBI to move on from the investigation. Is it appropriate for the White House to be directing the FBI what to do with any investigation they're currently investigating?

MS. SANDERS: I don't think that that was the nature or the intent of my comment, wasn't to direct the FBI, but I think it's simply -- we're fully compliant with helping this process move along. We'd like to see it completed so that, frankly, all of us can move on and focus on things that Blake listed earlier, like tax reform, like healthcare, like infrastructure. Those are big programs, big priorities for this administration. And, frankly, what we'd like to be the number-one thing that we're talking about here, today, every single day, is not FBI investigations but things that, frankly, affect American voters and American taxpayers every single day.

Q What exactly precipitated the Monday meeting? Was that because of the hearing last week and what he said there? Or did the Monday meeting that the President had with the DOJ officials come out of a longer process of consideration of Comey?

MS. SANDERS: The Department of Justice officials were here for other business, not specifically to meet with the President on that. The topic came up, and they asked to speak with the President, and that's how it moved forward.

Q Did the President previously talk to Attorney General Sessions or Deputy Attorney Rosenstein about the possibility of going this way with Comey?

MS. SANDERS: Not that I'm aware of, no.

Q Did it come up in the discussion process before the confirmation that the President was considering nominating Rosenstein -- did he talk about Comey with Rosenstein then?

MS. SANDERS: No, not that I'm aware of.

Q The President's statement that he talked to Comey about whether or not he was being investigated raises several questions. Can you talk about why you're not willing to add any more to that about who asked for that and why that was discussed?

MS. SANDERS: Who asked for what? I'm sorry.

Q About whether or not -- I mean, the President seems to be trying to exonerate himself in this. I mean, can you talk about why you won't add anymore to what that conversation was, how that took place, when it took place --

Q The three occasions -- could you clarify those three occasions and who initiated?

MS. SANDERS: Again, I'm not going to get into the specific details. I'll check and see if we have follow-up on that. But at this point, I'm not going to comment any further than what was spelled out in the letter.

Q Why was it in the letter? If you don't want to clarify or comment, why was it put in the letter in the first place?

MS. SANDERS: Look, I think it was something that is far above my pay grade -- was decided to be included. And again, I'm not going to get into the specifics of that.

Thanks, guys, so much.

END

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